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**True Crime Narratives**

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**Abstract**

This article investigates the contemporary fascination with true crime narratives, an area which is fast becoming a central area of interest in crime fiction studies. As the overarching genre of crime fiction itself becomes the most read literature genre, not to mention its growing popularity in other popular cultural mediums – TV, film, documentary, podcast, blogs, etc., true crime – which has always been a popular sub-genre – is arguably moving centre stage aligned to our recent obsession with the real life figure of the serial killer. The usual discussions of both individual and collective obsession and fascination with such topics, is generally limited to arguments within conscious parameters of ethical choice, This paper will explore an alterative reading that introduces the Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts of the *sinthome* and *jouissance*, and argues that any reading of these topics cannot be contained within rationality and ethical choice.

**Key words:** Serial killer, true crime, fascination, obsession, evil, *sinthome*, *jouissance.*

## TRUE CRIME NARRATIVES

On the evening of April 21st, 2016, Michelle McNamara went to bed in her Los Angeles home, exhausted, anxious and overwhelmed after having spent years attempting to track down a Californian serial killer, active in the 1970s and 80s, who she had nicknamed the GSK – or Golden State Killer. She took a mix of prescription drugs to help her sleep after numerous wakeful nights – including Adderall and Xanax. She never woke up, and her autopsy found a previously undiagnosed heart condition which, along with the drugs, killed her. She was forty-six years old.

A book, *I'll be Gone in the Dark*: *One Woman's Obsessive Search for the Golden State Killer* was published posthumously in 2018. Unfinished at the time of McNamara's death, it was completed by her collaborator and fellow true crime obsessive Paul Haynes, and her husband, Patton Oswalt. The book reached number two on the *New York Times Bestseller List* for non-fiction, and number one when print and e-book sales were combined. McNamara's quest for the Golden State Killer did not identify him, not was it her first obsession with true crime, and it is reasonable to suppose that it would not have been her last once that particular serial killer was tracked down. In 2006 she started her blog *True Crime Diary* http://truecrimediary.com/, in which she catalogued and described numerous cases of both solved and unsolved murders. She became obsessed with true crime at the age of fourteen, after the rape and murder of Kathleen Lombardo, near to her home in Chicago. In the blog, she reflects on why this might have been the case: 'I think the narcotic pull for me is what I think of as the powerful absence that haunts an unsolved crime. Murderers lose power the moment we know them.' (McNamara, blog, accessed July 4th 2019). This obsession continued until her death. The opening pages of *I'll be Gone in the Dark* poignantly describe her nocturnal activities, fuelled by obsession but also enabled by the contemporary world of digital media, that allowed her (and many others) to enter into a world in a laptop, whereas previously information would have taken weeks or months to collect and collate:

> That summer I haunted the serial killer at night from my daughter's playroom. For the most part I mimicked the bedroom routine of a normal person. Teeth brushed. Pajamas on. But after my husband and daughter fell asleep, I'd retreat to my makeshift workspace and boot up my laptop, that fifteen-inch-wide hatch of

> endless possibilities. Our neighbourhood northwest of downtown Los Angeles is remarkably quiet at night. Sometimes the only sound was the *click* as I tapped ever closer down the driveways of men I didn't know using Google Street View. I rarely moved but I leaped decades with a few keystrokes. Yearbooks. Marriage certificates. Mug shots. I scoured thousands of pages of 1970s-era police files. I pored over autopsy reports. That I should do this surrounded by half a dozen stuffed animals and a set of miniature pink bongos didn't strike me as unusual. I'd found my searching place, as private as a rat's maze. Every obsession needs a room of its own. Mine was strewn with coloring paper on which I'd scribbled down Californian penal codes in crayon (McNamara 1)

This is well worth quoting at length. In the above McNamara recognises the obsessive nature of her activity, while acknowledging that it is something that will not change and that defines and controls her life as much – or even more – than what she does during the rest of her time – that which sets her apart from what she considers to constitute a 'normal' person. She articulates her obsession – her private 'rat's maze,' which, on the 16th April 2016, ultimately led to her premature death. In Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, McNamara's obsession was her *sinthome*, the individual and singular symptom that caused her to keep up a pattern of behaviour that she herself does not view as normal, but which sustains and defines her.

It is not contentious to argue that if the Golden State Killer was caught as a result of her immense and intense endeavours, she would celebrate but not stop – her obsession would merely be displaced onto another case, another serial killer. This, as I will demonstrate through an explanation of this key theoretical term, constitutes a psychoanalytical reading of both her, and our, obsession with true crime. It is important to note that this article presents some initial findings and proposes a significantly different argument in respect of the ever more popular growth of true crime narratives and, as such, does not claim to provide any explanatory framework, instead the aim is to initiate a discussion that in future, will develop further. The format of the article will be to present an introduction to the relevant theory that I consider useful in respect of a way of reading true crime narratives, while being mindful of the impossibility of including more than a few case studies, or relevant examples, of this cultural phenomenon, within a journal article

This term *sinthome* was developed by Lacan late in his work, and is specifically addressed in seminar XX111 *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX111*. Prior to this 1975 seminar, Lacan had concentrated on the triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, placing more emphasis on the Real than he had during the earlier stages of his work, where the emphasis had been placed on the relationship between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.[1]

In this earlier development of his work, Lacan, in his 'return to Freud', emphasised the role of decoding – the traditional psychoanalytic symptom where the symptom was able to be traced and deciphered (to an extent) through the process of psychoanalysis. His shift during the latter stages of his work moved towards the third of the triad – the Real, a move that incorporated the new concept of the *sinthome*, which deviates from the traditional meaning of the symptom. He introduces this concept through the reading of a literary writer, James Joyce, thus immediately marking its relationship to the Imaginary of art and representation. In the Seminar, Lacan introduces the *sinthome* into the triadic structure of the Borromean knot, the diagram that he introduced in 1972 and heavily drew upon from that point on. This 'fourth point' or *sinthome* joins the knot (the inter-linking Imaginary, Symbolic and Real) as a floating fourth element (in the diagrams rather like a limp rubber band draping through the other three terms). There is no signifier for the Real but an unconscious intentionality is revealed through speaking about symptoms. The *sinthome* links the Real and the Symbolic (the world of speech, systems and signification) and the symptom emerges in a singular fashion. The *sinthome*, as distinct from the symptom, accounts for why suffering human beings 'hold' their symptom so close – a discussion that can be traced back to Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) in which he examines the structure of repetition and introduces the speculative concept of the Death Drive.[2] The *sinthome* cannot be defined or

[1] Lacan's terms Real, Imaginary and Symbolic refer to the triadic structure of the human psyche. The Imaginary was the first term to be articulated in the early 'Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' (first presented in 1936). For Lacan, this moment (which occurs between 6-18 months) is the point at which the human baby first catches sight if itself an object, introduces an illusory sense of a whole self which is fundamentally alienating. It is significantly tied to mother-child dualism, which is shattered by the symbolic entry of the paternal signifier. The Symbolic came to significance in the Rome report of 1953. is the world of other peoples, rules and order (most especially language) to which the human child must adhere in order to function in the inter-subjective universe. The Real is the last of the three terms and the one most relevant here. It is precisely NOT reality – it is located beyond the Symbolic and is opposed to the Imaginary. The Real remains inaccessible and can be touch only by the 'little pieces of the Real' that manifest as symptoms, repetitions, and other traumatic gaps in the Symbolic Order. It is Slavoj Žižek who utilises this term in respect of popular culture.

[2] In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), Freud articulates the term of the death drive (or Thanatos) for the first time. He argues that the unpleasant 'symptoms' that patients repetitively experience are, in effect, a

reduced to a place within the triad of Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, but instead 'leeches' onto each of them in a singular and individualistic manner. Michelle McNamara's unremitting obsession with the Golden State Killer, and the structure of repetition that she adopted during her night time activities adds up to more than the sum of its parts. As mentioned above, she admitted that, had she identified that particular serial killer, she would have simply moved onto another, arguing that it is the 'narcotic chase' that she was hooked on. Her enjoyment lay primarily in the chase, not the outcome.

Crucially, Lacan identifies *jouissance* (or enjoyment in a specifically psychoanalytic use of the term that incorporates both pleasure and pain) as the key element that binds the four (including the *sinthome*) elements of the knot. This concept *(sinthome*) was, as already explained, introduced late in Lacan's work, remaining untranslated until 2017. It remains relatively under-explored in the English-speaking academic world, partly because of its difficulty, and in addition an expectation that the with Lacan's entire oeuvre, and a deep knowledge of Freud's work on metapsychology. Slavoj Žižek however, makes full use of the term throughout his writing – while offering no explanatory framework for it, he incorporates it into his work on contemporary and popular culture. He argues: 'in contrast to symptom which is a cipher of some repressed meaning, *sinthome* has no determinate meaning; it just gives body, in its repetitive pattern, to some elementary matrix of *jouissance*, of excessive enjoyment.' (Žižek, 2001. 199).

I would argue that, it is in exactly the ways in which true crime narratives deny any attempt to expose particular repressed meanings, thus revealing the 'truth' of the genre's title to be fundamentally disingenuous, that open it to psychoanalytic interpretation. The inter-twined notions of *sinthome* and *jouissance*, most especially the denial of those particular repressed meaning underneath, to be exposed, uncovered, and 'cured' is key to the ways in which it is possible to understand the pull of true crime, as I have already articulated in respect of Michelle McNamara, and will continue to develop in respect of group 'enjoyment' of true crime. This applies not merely relevant to seemingly 'exceptional' obsessives such as

manifestation of the ways in which individuals' internal forces work against Eros, or the life/sexual drives. In part, this was an attempt to understand the concept then being developed, that of 'shell shock', or what we might term 'post-traumatic stress disorder' today. Freud and other psychoanalysts wondered why unpleasant experience were not pushed into the unconscious but instead kept emerging in a repetitive way, inhibiting the pleasure principle, that Freud had previously believed to govern the human psyche.

McNamara, but arguably to all of us who are attracted to such material. In this way, McNamara's obsession with tracing serial killers since she was fourteen might have been triggered by the case of Kathleen Lombardo, but would likely have arisen anyway, and deep analysis which attempted to ask why, would be futile. This was McNamara's *sinthome*, which provided her with enjoyment and which, it could be argued, enabled her to function outside of her 'rat's maze' where she spent her nights. Thus, paradoxically, her daily life as a screenwriter and mother, rather than sustaining her nocturnal life, rather depended on it. In this way, her 'symptom' or *sinthome* [3] was what brought meaning into her life, thus rendering the 'normal', daily routine bearable. Psychanalytically speaking, a life lived within the confines of the symbolic order is an impossibility and while repetitive patterns of behaviour are often deemed as pathological, they can conversely be viewed as ways of negotiating the threat to an overwhelming collapse of the symbolic universe by a flood of unconscious affect.

The main point to be gleaned from this term and its incorporation into the study of both writing and popular culture by Žižek, is the way that the element of pleasure to be gained from the *sinthome* lies precisely in its lack of hidden meaning – it is therefore incurable. He argues that shared *sinthomes*, just like shared belief systems, can 'hold' communities (such as McNamara's group of fellow obsessives who ranged from retired detectives to young male computer buffs) together when it becomes something that a rational symbolic universe would exclude. Examples from popular culture can illustrate this. In respect of the individual, it can be an attempt to avoid breakdown psychotic or neurotic, by constructing an individual *sinthome* as a way of holding the symbolic together: 'The paranoid construction…is already an attempt to heal ourselves, to pull ourselves out of the real "illness," the psychotic breakdown – the "end of the world," the falling apart of the symbolic universe – with the help of a substitute-formation.' (Wright and Wright, 31). While Žižek often discusses creative writers and films (specifically those directed by Alfred Hitchcock) as illustrative of the ways in which the *sinthome* functions in popular culture, the recent rise of true crime narratives (which are however, as I will explain below, nothing new) can constitute a powerful element of enjoyment that are unable to be unpacked with recourse to the Symbolic.

[3] Both symptom as described in respect of Freud's repetition compulsion, and Lacan's notion of *sinthome*, while different, can be applied here.

I would argue that attempts to rationalise or justify both individual and collective obsession with serial killers, murder and so on, are doomed to prove unsatisfactory if based on conscious decisions that either demonise those who enjoy such 'entertainment' or try to explain its addictive pull. As explained above, the psychoanalytic meaning of 'enjoyment', *jouissance*, includes within it an abject element of transgression challenging the 'clean and proper body' that Kristeva so powerfully describes in *Powers of Horror*: 'Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery.' (1982, 2) In this sense the transgressive fascination with true crime that takes the reader/viewer close to the bodily borders, spillages and violations, necessarily contains an element of the monstrous. In this way the enjoyment, fascination and obsession with such popular cultural productions, must always go 'beyond' the pleasure principle, and the satisfaction that is experienced includes repulsion and a seesawing of pleasure and abject disgust. Thus, any explanatory framework based on the symbolic or the conscious, rational mind, are doomed to fail. This is highlighted through the proliferation of articles that have started to appear recently, in which true crime 'addicts' and others who are vehemently opposed to the sub-genre, are either soul searching as to why they are attracted to it, or casting aspersions as to the ethical and moral 'validity' of such popular cultural manifestations, or both. These make valid points concerning the ways in which a far greater concentration on victimology is badly needed, and it has been disturbing to read the offensive and misogynistic comments directed at Dr Hallie Rubenhold, who is arguing in a forthcoming book on Jack the Ripper's victims, *The Five*, that the sexist attitudes of the police at the time led to them inaccurately labelling the five known victims as prostitutes when in fact they held a variety of 'respectable' working-class jobs. In addition, one should note the recent surge of interest in Ted Bundy, due in part to the 2019 film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*. A fairly mild review in *The Guardian* newspaper pointed out: 'And then, after the final credits – which unspool alongside the traditional pedantic revelation of real-life TV news footage underlining the film's *verité* credentials – we get as a solemn afterthought a list of the 30 known victims.' (*Guardian* 2019). Netflix's *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019) revealed very little new material to supposedly satisfy avid true crime fans, and additionally continued the tradition of ignoring the agency and individuality of the victims, who become merely 'meat' for the mythology of this particular sadist. This is not the place to go into detail about the realms of Bundy 'fans' supporting him from the public gallery during his trial,

many of them bearing a close resemblance to his victims, with their long dark hair with a centre parting, nor the judges almost conciliatory words to Bundy as he sentenced him, but the mixed repulsion and veneration of such an individual is nothing new and is also inexorably linked to *jouissance*. The current article is not the place to articulate this further in respect of the fascination of serial killers; it is however relevant to the argument here to note the overdetermination (in the Freudian sense) of the potency of such a figure in the contemporary popular cultural consciousness.

Crime Fiction as a genre grows in popularity every year, a trend that shows no sign of abating.[4] Indeed, the multiplicity of sub-genres emerging increases year on year, while there is also a growing trend in revisionist texts that seek to re-imagine previous popular generic periods such as the Golden Age. At the same time, interest in 'true crime' is arguably spreading even faster and further in the early decades of the twenty first century.[5] True crime narratives may be accounts of attempts to track a murderer, or novels raise relevant questions in respect of issues mirroring real events, such as Columbine in Lionel Shriver's 2003 *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. The discourse of evil is often unthinkingly adopted to account for deviant actions that society has difficulty explaining or understanding. At the same time, the 'deviant' figure or individual (such as Bundy) frequently becomes the focus of social obsession, with many serial killers, for example, exciting an abject mixture of fear and fascination, and in some cases achieving notoriety and celebrity status. This in itself has resulted in a wealth of literature devoted to 'real crimes' and their perpetrators, but very little, if any, of this material is of a serious academic nature.

The label 'true crime' has historically been used to sell magazines and voyeuristic 'pulp' paperbacks, seeking to terrify and thrill the reader in equal measure. The psychoanalytic approach that I am adopting does not provide definitive or reductive explanations for actions that society deems evil in their transgressions of social, moral and ethical frameworks. Indeed, the genre itself is often presented as a 'problem.' [6]Instead, the focus is on a fuller engagement with the psychological, the emotional, the obsessive and typical behaviour

[4] https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/apr/12/mystery-crime-fiction-bestselling-book-genre-sophie-hannah
[5] https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/dec/12/serial-thrillers-why-true-is-popular-cultures-most-wanted
[6] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-47474996

patterns that form an important part of the contemporary fascination with the criminal and the deviant. Such material will predominantly be found within true crime narratives which have recently, in the main, been in the form of visual representations based on particular cases (usually white male serial killers) but sometimes also in 'purely' fictional texts and memoirs. As already raised, contemporary digital media forms have been harnessed to excite and extend public interest and engagement with criminal cases that, in some instances, are still in process. Indeed, debates rage as to whether the 'documentary' series *Making a Murderer* seasons one and two (Netflix, 2015, 2018) is influencing or, indeed, even setting the agenda for the legal appeals in the ongoing case. *Serial*, an investigative journalism podcast produced by Sarah Koenig, set a world record for the most downloaded podcast; Adnan Syed, the boyfriend of Hae Min Lee, who was convicted of her 1999 murder, was found guilty in 2000 and then sentenced to life imprisonment. In 2016, Judge Martin P. Welch ordered a new trial for Syed, as a direct result of *Serial.* Whether or not this is yet to be fully recognized, it seems clear that this genre has now become what has been described as an 'impromptu branch' of the judiciary in both these cases. In 2017, Netflix brought *Mindhunter* to our screens, based on John Douglas's 1977 book *Mind Hunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*. The success of season 1 prompted the re-release of Douglas's memoir and drew attention not only to long-executed serial killers, but also to figures such as Ed Kemper, still (apparently happily) incarcerated in the California Medical Facility.

Of course, both the personal and public obsession with true crime is not a specifically contemporary or even twentieth/twenty-first-century phenomenon: indeed, this is far from being the case. The work usually considered to be the first full-length detective novel, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), features a fictional detective, Cuff; a figure clearly based upon Detective Inspector Jack Whicher, one of eight men chosen to be the first detectives within the newly established (1829) Metropolitan Police. The character and the case that Collins draws upon in *The Moonstone* is the murder of a child at Rode Hill House, Rode, Somerset. Public interest in this murder was considerable, and Whicher knew he was expected to solve the case, just as emerging figures in Crime Fiction always seemed able to do. The truth, however, was more complex. The eventual confession by the 16-year-old Constance Kent, that she had murdered her younger half-brother, threw issues of gender, class, and possible incest into the mix; revealing that real-life events were altogether murkier than Crime Fiction authors could envisage. Kate Summerscale's 2008 *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher or The Murder at Road Hill House* reads like a crime novel, drawing the reader in to

the extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish between it and the novel its events informed: *The Moonstone.* At the same point in the nineteenth century, the first Edinburgh detective, turned crime writer, James McLevy, published a series of crime novels which included *The Disclosures of a Detective* and *Curiosities of Crime in Edinburgh.* These writings, combined with his thirty-year career, provided both an inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as he developed his character Sherlock Holmes, and were ground-breaking in blurring the boundaries between real and fictional detective narratives. Since the inception of the genre of crime fiction it is precisely its mutable nature of narratives and the process of narrativization that works to *destabilize* boundaries between the 'real' and the 'unreal,' thus evoking vicarious pleasures from both the text and the 'real' life event.

It was in the twentieth century however, that true crime narratives achieved a level of popularity and obsession that has continued and intensified over the first two decades of the twenty first. Historically, the best-selling true crime account is Vincent Bugliosi's (chief prosecutor in the trials of Charles Manson) and Kurt Gentry's 1970's *Helter Skelter.* In second place is Truman Capote's 1966 journalistic account of the 1959 murders of the Clutter family in Holcombe, Kansas in 1955, and the subsequent trials of the perpetrators: *In Cold Blood*. Another seminal text, Norman Mailer's 1979 *The Executioner's Song,* focused on Gary Gilmore, and won the Pulitzer Prize. Even a cursory reading of true crime narratives reveals widely divergent attitudes to issues of gender, class and race. In *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher,* the self-avowed murderer is a 16 year-old female, whose place within the rigid class system of the time, initially placed her above suspicion, which fell on the servants; something echoed in *The Moonstone* when Cuff is denied access to the 'ladies of the house.' In this instance, assumptions about gender, class and violence give the narrative a compulsive consistency; while later, figures such as Myra Hindley and Aileen Wuornos, both objects of intense fascination and speculation for the public, nevertheless tend to be demonized and ultimately relegated to the side-lines. When a woman kills for pleasure, such as Manson family member Susan Atkins, her actions are viewed as both a violation of 'good and proper' femininity, while also seen as 'controlled' by an evil cult leader.

FBI psychological profiler and author Robert K. Ressler, argued in his 1992 autobiography *Whoever Fights Monsters: My Twenty Years Hunting Serial Killers for the FBI*, that he did not discuss female serial killers because they tend to kill in sprees rather than in a sequential

fashion. It can be argued that, while this might be the case, there exists a much more complex set of reasons and issues that reach to the heart of gendered heteronormativity and toxic masculinity, and that these need to be addressed, although this is outside the remit of this article. The previous references to Kristeva are perhaps most clearly relevant here however. She argues that it is precisely in representations of the abject that are linked to the maternal, that the threat to the symbolic, phallocentric social order, is challenged: 'Why does corporeal waste, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-parings to decay, represent – like a metaphor that would have become incarnate – the objective frailty of symbolic order?' (82, 44)

Aligned with that, the issue of race within true crime narratives is highly pertinent and, similarly, cannot be ignored or over-simplified. It has been shown statistically that racial bias is endemic in the US justice system, with black males much more likely to be sentenced to death than white, especially if the victim is white[7]; a long-established trend that unequivocally points to the systematic institutional racism within the system: 'By reserving the penalty of death for black defendants, or for the poor, or for those convicted of killing white persons, we perpetrate the ugly legacy of slavery—teaching our children that some lives are inherently less precious than other.' (Rev. Joseph E. Lowery.)[8] Given, also, that the vast majority of state prosecutors are white males, it is remarkable that so few black serial killers have been identified as such by the FBI. The name of Wayne Williams, dubbed the 'Atlanta child murderer,' may come to mind; while the Washington DC snipers were assessed by the FBI as not meeting the criteria necessary to be designated serial killers. The exclusion in the USA of African-American serial killers from the FBI classification, and from representations in the popular cultural landscape such as true crime narratives in the media (except as low-life killers) and predominantly gay-directed serial killers, such as John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer in the USA, and Dennis Nilson in the UK, point to racist and misogynistic agenda amongst those who 'decide' which figures are deemed to be of interest. While there is a degree of fascination surrounding these men, and various studies of them, they are, along with black and female killers, treated very differently, and that their sexuality, alongside gender, race and class, appears to exclude them from an FBI-defined 'special status,' that while males predominantly 'achieve' in the real crime stakes. These discourses

[7] https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/executions-overview/executions-by-race-and-race-of-victim

[8] https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/dpic-reports/in-depth/the-death-penalty-in-black-and-white-who-lives-who-dies-who-decides

emerge and are becoming increasingly popular with today's readers/viewers of crime fiction, and it is my contention that the fantasies that this genre reveals are part of the disturbing paradox of a secularized western culture that increasingly mobilizes the language of evil in the absence of a fixed moral, ethical or religious code  I have established  that the figure of the murderer, whether serial killer, spree killer, or deviant 'other,' captures the public imagination. This public fascination with true crime narratives throughout the nineteenth century has been briefly examined, linking the rise of true crime narratives to the development of the 'new' genre of crime fiction; evoke the most interest, and why. Author Ian Rankin argues that 'humans are fascinated by evil,' and pinpoints why crime narratives allow that fascination to be expressed: 'We wonder where it comes from and whether we ourselves could ever carry out such an act. Some readers turn to crime fiction for answers, while others prefer true crime. Of course, there is a vicarious frisson for the fan of either – the reader stands at the shoulder of monsters without being endangered.' Again, Alenka Zupanic, speaking from a psychoanalytical perspective, argues in an interview in the journal *Cabinet* (2001), that evil has *no* substance, and that 'evil is not only something that we abhor more than anything else: it is also something that manages to catch hold of our desire. One could even say that the thing that makes a certain object or phenomenon 'evil' is precisely the fact that it gives body to this ambiguity of desire and abhorrence.' Freud's theorization of the 'beyond' of the 'pleasure principle' (see above) and the ambiguity of desire and abhorrence, will be examined alongside contemporary work on psychopathology, the labels psychopath and sociopath, and the ways in which social anxieties about deviant behaviours depend on the interrelation between desire and repulsion.

To return to the contemporary world, as already mentioned, true crime is still the biggest growth area under the umbrella genre of crime fiction. No matter what form which it adopts it is always a narrative, never a conduit to some immutable truth. Alongside *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, two other real crime narratives were published recently, Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich's *The Fact of a Body: A Gripping True Crime Murder Investigation* (2018), and Claudia Rowe's *The Spider and the Fly: A Reporter, a Serial Killer, and the Meaning of Murder* (2017). *The Spider and the Fly* is a first-person account by a young reporter Claudia Rowe, of her 'relationship' with serial killer Kendall Francois, in her town, Poughkeepsie, New York. Francois, a black serial killer, was very little known compared to those such as Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer. He was convicted of raping killing eight women between 1996-1998, and keeping their bodies in the rotting and disordered family home. Francois

eventually pleaded guilty in order to escape the possibility of a death sentence, and died in prison in 2014 at the age of forty-three. Rowe's account of the killings and her subsequent communications with the killer lasted for five years and included letters, phone calls and visits to him. The book received mixed reviews, recurring criticisms being the ways in which Rowe appears to blur boundaries between the serial killer and herself, and also the ways in which she imbues him with a power that she then perceives he holds over her. Interviewed in an article largely sympathetic to Rowe, the latter argues for her motivations: 'That came out of my own childhood and teenage years. I met people who were extremely cruel and had rough times in my family, that's what drove me towards journalism, trying to see into a person and figure out why people do things.' (news.au.com) At the end of the Epilogue, written thirteen years after she received his last letter and, in effect, fled from Francois, Rowe offers her final words on the 'relationship' she believed she has been engaged in throughout the five years of her obsession:

> For years I wondered what Kendall thought when I stopped writing and vanished without explanation. Did he rage in his cell? Curse my name to anyone who would listen? Send solicitous notes to my old post office box, trying to tempt me back? I imagine that he told himself I'd betrayed him, just as he predicted I would. But Kendall always meant more to me than he understood. And I believe part of him truly wanted to be the friend we both pretended I was. (Rowe, 272)

In *The Fact of a Body*, Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich goes further than Rowe, insofar as she merges her true crime narrative about the killing of a young boy, Jeremy Guillory, by his neighbour, Ricky Langley. At the time of the murder, Langley is a damaged man-boy of twenty-six, with multiple developmental problems and a history of sexual abuse. While being evaluated and denying that he himself had been abused as a child, Langley demonstrates clear suicidal tendencies: 'He drinks household cleaners and walks into traffic, daring the cars to hit him. How he tells the caseworker he wants to be hospitalized so he can't molest anyone. "It seems the harder I try not to do it, the more I do it." '(Marzano-Lesnevich, 133) Despite interventions from mental health practitioners, Langley is free to kill, confessing three days after the murder. But this jug-eared, friendless misfit is incapable of understanding his actions, and veers between denying he molested Jeremy and admitting he did: 'Ten years later, he'll still be confessing, unable to stop telling the story different ways. He casts around

for stories as if he's casting around for an identity, trying to figure out who he is and who this means he'll be. (Marzano-Lesnevich, 190)

Marzano-Lesnevich first came across Langley when she joined Clive Stafford-Smith's deference firm in New Orleans, where she interned for a summer while she was a law student at Harvard. Despite her avowed opposition to the death penalty, when she first saw a tape of Langley's confession at the point where the law firm had successfully fought to get him off death row, her feelings were of revulsion and a desire to see him die for his crime. *The Fact of a Body* narrativizes Langley's childhood and upbringing alongside her own sexual abuse at the hands of her grandfather from the age of three, and the subsequent failure of her parents to do any more than keep the perpetrator at a distance once she revealed the abuse to them. *The Fact of a Body* is an uncomfortable read, mainly because of Marzano-Lesnevich's need to merge the two stories and in effect, merge her own history with Langley's, a murderer decidedly uninteresting and unintelligent, certainly unable to provide any answers at all. Unlike Janet Malcolm (see below) and Rowe, she visits him only once and leaves the content of that out of the book. This book, while well written and, in respect of her own story, both moving and horrifying, leeches into and attempts to legitimize itself through the true crime narrative and, as such, ultimately fails in its aim.

Both of the above texts clearly demonstrate the problematic nature of the attempt to narrativize the 'stories' of real-life murderers alongside the authors' perceptions and constructions of their own 'immutable truths.' The obsessive and repetitive nature of both narratives reveal the pitfalls of attempting to remain objective while in actuality revealing the ways in which each individual author's *sinthome* can be traced through the texts. They both lack the level of insight that Michelle McNamara demonstrated in her writing, and in addition they each demonstrate an almost unconscious abject pull towards the actions of their study, which makes for uncomfortable reading.

While Janet Malcolm does not engage with psychoanalytic theory, her seminal text in this area, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990), she argues that 'every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to know what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible.' (Malcolm, 3) This opening paragraph was deliberately provocative insofar as it sweepingly gathers 'all' journalism into it – but the book that follows is an account of a true crime narrative 'gone wrong' more than twenty-five years before the contemporary texts of which Row and Marzano-Lesnevich, and in a different sense, McNamara, have engaged in.

The case that Malcolm analyses in *The Journalist and the Murderer* concerns the book, *Fatal Vision* (1983) that true crime writer and journalist Joe McGiniss wrote on convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald[9] The MacDonald case was and remains notorious both for the long and convoluted process it took to finally incarcerate him (he remains in prison today, still protesting his innocence) and for the legal case concerning *Fatal Vision*. In 1979 MacDonald hired McGinnis to write a book demonstrating his innocence. McGinnis spent time with MacDonald, interviewing him while he was on bail and attending the trial. During this time, he became convinced of MacDonald's guilt, believing he murdered his family in a psychotic rage, brought on by amphetamine use. MacDonald then sued McGinnis for this reversal of belief, despite having signed a release which allowed the author to write freely. The case – that of fraud and breach of contract – went to a jury trial in 1987, which became deadlocked and eventually settled out of court and MacDonald being awarded $325,00. The Kassab family then sued MacDonald for profiting from a crime he had been convicted of, that case too being settled out of court for a percentage of the profits from the book.

Janet Malcolm, in *The Journalist and the Murderer*, focuses on the MacDonald-McGinniss trial in order to use this case to investigate the ethics of journalism, with a true crime narrative that didn't go the way the convicted murderer wanted it to, providing a lurid and fascinating spectacle for public consumption. Malcolm was not convinced by McGinniss' 'reading' of MacDonald as a 'pathological narcissist,' finding his dullness not a cover for a psychopath but evidence of an ordinary, boring man, albeit not an innocent one. In a passage that nails down the ways in which the true crime writer wants and needs to 'own' their chosen flawed 'hero, she argues that it is this aspect of MacDonald that so disappoints

[9] The case of Jeffrey MacDonald remains one of the most notorious multiple murder investigations and convictions of the C20th.MacDonald is a former American doctor and US army officer who in 1979 was convicted of murdering his pregnant wife and two young daughters in 1970. When called by MacDonald to the crime scene in the middle of the night on February 17th 1970, first responders found the three brutally murdered, with the word pig written in blood on the wall near MacDonald's wife, Colette's body. This clear reference to the recent Tate/La Bianca murders by the Manson Family was, it was argued at his trial, purposefully employed to draw attention from MacDonald himself. He was found semi-unconscious, claiming he had been attacked by several people. MacDonald was charged with the three murders, but with the support of his father in law, Freddy Kassab, he was not prosecuted. Despite initially believing him, Kassab became increasingly suspicious of MacDonald and the case was re-opened in 1974. After years of legal arguments MacDonald was convicted in 1979 and sentenced to three consecutive terms of life imprisonment, although even after he was freed on bail for 15 months before a reversal of his successful appeal sent him back to jail in 1982.

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McGinniss: '…we have an instance of a journalist who apparently found out too late (or let himself find out too late) that the subject of his book was not up to scratch – not suitable for a work of non-fiction, not a member of the wonderful race of auto-fictionalisers, like Joseph Michell's Joe Gould or Truman Capote's Perry Smith' (Malcolm, 71), continuing on to argue that 'non-fiction novel' as it was called then, was dependent on these characters, rather than MacDonald, '..simply a guy like the rest of us, with nothing to offer but a tedious and improbable story about his innocence of a bad crime. (Malcolm, 72) For Malcolm, this position becomes morally untenable. Concerns on many levels about the moral status of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) are themselves rife, one being the story of a party in 1965 at which Truman Capote reportedly literally jumped with glees when he heard the news that Smith and Hickock were to hang. Critic Kenneth Tynan, who was present, was so disgusted that in his review of the book he wrote: accusing Capote of a lack of moral responsibility – of failing to properly intervene in the legal process to save the accused from the rope. 'No piece of prose, however deathless, is worth a human life.'' (Highbrow magazine 2019)

Janet Malcolm herself had previously been sued by Jeffrey Masson, over her book *In the Freud Archives* (1984). Although the court eventually found in her favour, the ten-year ordeal prompted her to ask questions about the ethics of journalism, especially when it concerned the true story. In the afterword to *The Journalist and the Murderer*, she quotes from Nabokov's biography of Gogol: 'It is strange, the morbid inclination we have to derive satisfaction from the fact (usually false and always relevant) that a work of art is traceable to a "true story" (Malcolm, 151), where he asks a most pertinent question: 'Is it because we begin to respect ourselves more when we learn that the writer, just like ourselves, was not clever enough to make up a story himself?' (Malcolm, 151)

In true crime narratives, outlined here through the MacDonald case and contemporary narratives, it is the murderer whose story is viewed as a linear, explanatory narrative of self, that proves inadequate. McGinniss was a man, and it is clear – reductive or not – that his narrative and relationship with MacDonald is predicated on tropes of masculine authority and competition. In each of these recent true crime narratives, the author places herself at the centre of another's story, another discourse, through the obsession with matching her life and experiences with that of an other whose actions have (serial rapist and murderer, paedophile and child killer) placed them outside the symbolic framework that constitutes even the most rudimentary inter-subjective communication. It is notable that in two of the three very

contemporary true crime narratives that I have concentrated on here, the voices of the transgressors, the killers are, to say the least, ambiguous and that, beyond that, they appear to 'not know', have no insight into themselves and their crimes (most especially in Rowe and Marzano-Lesnevich's narratives. In the Lacanian construction of 'between two deaths' he theorises that there is a state which can be occupied if the subject has experienced the death of the symbolic without yet being physically dead. He argues that in these cases, existence is a psychotic break from the symbolic, with the individual existing within the Real. He argues that this space is void of the presence of desire but instead filled with an unconditional demand.[10] This is related to the concept of the *sinthome* because, for Lacan, even in this space, anxieties and repetitive patterns of behaviour are not absent, rather that those occupying it

Žižek utilises this concept in respect of popular culture, claiming that this space is occupied in our imaginary by those who are non-dead such as vampires, zombies and ghosts: …the fantasy of a person who does not want to stay dead but returns again and again to pose a threat to the living. (Žižek 1991, 22) If this is transposed onto the figure of the murderer, then they are a function that bears no relation to their agency, intentionality nor their comprehensible motivations. This space has historically been designated 'evil' but if we read from Alenka Zupancic, as examined above, the void around which our own fascination, obsessional desire floats, is filled by beings who signify precisely nothing. In his analysis of popular culture Žižek describes how a 'quite ordinary, everyday object…as soon as it is elevated to the status of the "Thing," starts to function as a kind of screen, an empty space on which the subject projects the fantasies that support his desire.' (Žižek 1991, 133) So, when examining the phenomenon of true crime narratives, the *sinthome* is evoked and functions to sustain the fantasies of the commentator, the obsessive and the collective readers/viewers, not the murderous perpetrator (or innocent party) the *objet-a.* [11]

[10] In Lacan's formulation the three elements, need, demand and desire are key to an understanding of the human condition. The human baby is born with biological needs, in common with the babies of other species. He argues though, that the 'tragedy' of the human is to then predicate its being on uniquely human demand, which can never be met. Desire finds its place in the gap that appears when basic biological need is subtracted from impossible human demand. Desire then, by its very nature, can never be satisfied and flits from object to object (or part object in Freud's sense). 'Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need: this margin being that which is opened up by demand, the appeal of which can be unconditional only in regard to the Other.' (Lacan 1977, 311)

[11] For Lacan, the *object petit a* functions as a point that forces the subject to recognise their own desire, in relation to something that stands in for the Other – and as a remnant that is left after the introduction of the Symbolic into the Real. It is a kind of x point on which the subject can fixate and, in some sense, 'see' their own desire. It also stands as a surplus of *jouissance* and is '…that other point

To return to the start, what of the Golden State Killer, Michelle McNamara's *objet a*, the *sinthome* that was sustaining her desire during the years of obsessive search to uncover his identity? By 2016, around the fortieth anniversary of the first reported attack and the subsequent rape/murder spree of roughly fifty rapes and twelve murders, the obsession of Michelle and others, a task force created to catch him, and an offer of a fifty-thousand-dollar reward, something tiny caught him – DNA. In April 2018, Patton Oswalt went on a book tour to promote *I'll be Gone in the Dark*. At an event in Chicago he told the audience that he believed it would not be long before the GSK was apprehended, named and brought to justice. In fact, as he was speaking, back in California Joseph James DeAngelo had just been arrested – the evidence uncovered after his arrest and, alongside the DNA, is overwhelming that the former policeman, aged seventy-two at the time of his arrest, is the Golden State Killer.

That is of course nothing new, many cold cases are solved these days through familial DNA, as the GSK case was – which usually happens when a family member, even a distant one, involuntarily provides a sample when arrested, however minor the violation. However, the investigators in Sacramento did not find DeAngelo's familiar DNA match by either State or national Police databases, but by searching genealogy websites. They used a DNA sample from one of the crime scenes (something not available to them at the time of the rape/murders), and matched it to distant relatives who had used genealogy websites – and were able to trace the genetic family tree back to DeAngelo, who matched the rough age and geographical profile of the suspect. There have been other instances of this and it remains an example of a situation where a recent development comes into existence while its use by law enforcement is as yet unregulated, with undefined boundaries, civil rights groups believe it to be as serious invasion of privacy while the district attorney responsible for the DeAngelo case argued that if an individual leaves a trace of their DNA in a place that is a 'public domain' or, indeed, a crime scene, then it's fair game. The DeAngelo case will come to court

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where the subject sees himself as caused by a lack of *a*, and where a fills the gap constituted by the inaugural division of the subject. The *petit a* never crosses this gap. Recollect what we learned about the gaze, the most characteristic term for apprehending the proper function of the *object a*. This *a* is presented precisely, in the field of the mirage of the narcissistic function of desire, as the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signified. It is at this point of lack that the subject has to recognize himself.' (Lacan 1981, 270)

and at that point and time these arguments will undoubtedly be aired. DeAngelo will face charges (unless he pleads guilty in the meantime) due in no small part to Michelle McNamara's obsessive quest to raise interest in the case, despite it ultimately depending on DNA to identify him. The old man who appears in court will, again, become a cipher for the mix of public repulsion, obsession and enjoyment that marks the fascination with true crime.

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**BIO**

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